

The Master Key By John Fleming Wilson

By special arrangement for this paper, a photo-drama corresponding to the installments of "The Master Key," may now be seen at the leading moving picture theaters. By arrangement made with the Universal Film Mfg. Co., it is not only possible to read "The Master Key" each week, but also afterwards to see moving pictures illustrating our story.

TWELFTH INSTALLMENT

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SYNOPSIS—Doors open upon strange things. How many locked doors are there in this world? How many people are there trying to find "The Master Key"? Thomas Gallon found gold. He thought of two things: his daughter Ruth, and gold for her. Gallon died because his partner, Wilkerson, and demanded a share of his find. Wilkerson is seeking gold for the sake of a woman. John Dorr, the mining engineer in whose charge Ruth was left, is also fighting to find the secret which Thomas Gallon apparently took with him to his grave.

In his search for the Hindu who had bought the idol containing the plans of the mother lode of the Master Key mine John Dorr had recourse again to the pawnbroker.

That individual's curiosity was aroused by now and he asked a great many questions which John answered evasively. When it came to getting a description of the Hindu the broker could give but few details. He laid emphasis on the fact that he sold rugs and that he looked like any one of a dozen East Indians frequenting a Pacific port. He knew of no address.

With this Dorr had to be content, and he returned to Ruth to discuss with her what they should do next.

"If Wilkerson gets it, there is an easy way to get him," he said in the course of their conversation.

"How?" demanded Ruth.

"Have him arrested as a fugitive from justice and held for the county sheriff on the warrant that Tom Kane swore out," he replied.

Ruth considered this thoughtfully and shook her head.

"It would mean our going back to the mine and all kinds of trouble," she said wisely. "Besides, we wouldn't be any nearer the papers father wanted me to have."

"That is very true," John agreed. "We'll keep that in reserve in case we discover that he has the idol. Our only plan, then, is to trace this Hindu. That will be a hard job."

"Why not put detectives on the trail?"

"I don't think any detective could do better than myself," was the reply.

"But you can't do it all," she argued. "You can't be looking for this peddler and keeping an eye on Wilkerson and seeing to me at the same time."

"The seeing to you is the pleasantest part of the job," he said, laughing. "I refuse to delegate that to anyone. Of course, you're quite right, though, about its being too big an affair for me to handle alone. I think I'll ask Everett to join us. Maybe he can suggest something. I'll wire him and then we'll take a trip down to the waterfront and interview our launchman again. He seems to me a pretty level-headed chap, and he'll maybe be able to put us on the track of the Hindu if he took a steamer for the North, as I strongly suspect he did."

Ruth could not understand why the peddler should do this, and Dorr explained that the Hindu evidently had set great store on the idol, as he had not only paid cash but had given a rug as well in exchange.

"He would know that the thing was worthless as an article of merchandise," he went on. "In the next place he wasted no time in getting possession of it once he saw it. I have no doubt that it is sacred in his eyes, a god. It was stolen at some time from a temple. What more natural than that he should see the chance of a great reward for doing a pious duty and returning it to its native place?"

"But that's all guesswork," Ruth insisted practically.

"I know it," he admitted. "But a good guess is better than nothing to work on. Let's go and see our skipper person."

The launch captain received them genially and listened to John's story. At its finish he agreed with John that it was very likely that the Indian had recognized a native god and would restore it to its own temple.

"I've visited those eastern ports a good deal," he told them. "I know boys on a lark from the ship will do just that trick—run off with an idol for a curio, and I know the fuss the heathen make about it, too. They'll go any lengths to get back a first-chop god."

Before they left he promised to keep an eye open for the Hindu and inform them if he got the smallest clue. With this they had to be satisfied, as inquiries elsewhere developed nothing helpful.

Everett arrived on the evening train and after dinner listened to the story of their adventures with great interest. When he had asked a few questions he and John looked at each other. Finally Everett spoke.

"It might take years to locate that lode without the exact plans," he said thoughtfully. "I don't doubt that your father, Miss Ruth, spent many a long hour and day prospecting for it. So we must have the plans, if it's in the bounds of possibility to recover them. I think you will have to find your Hindu."

"There is the question of the mine," John said soberly. "It has already been allowed to go pretty much to ruin. Tom Kane would do his best, of course, but actually we are looking for the bird in the bush when we have one in the hand."

"I see your point," the promoter said promptly. "My offer of days ago still holds good. I'll finance this matter to the end and I'll look after the mine, too. So you can be carefree so far as that goes, John."

"You know I wouldn't take it for myself," John began awkwardly, and was silenced by a smile.

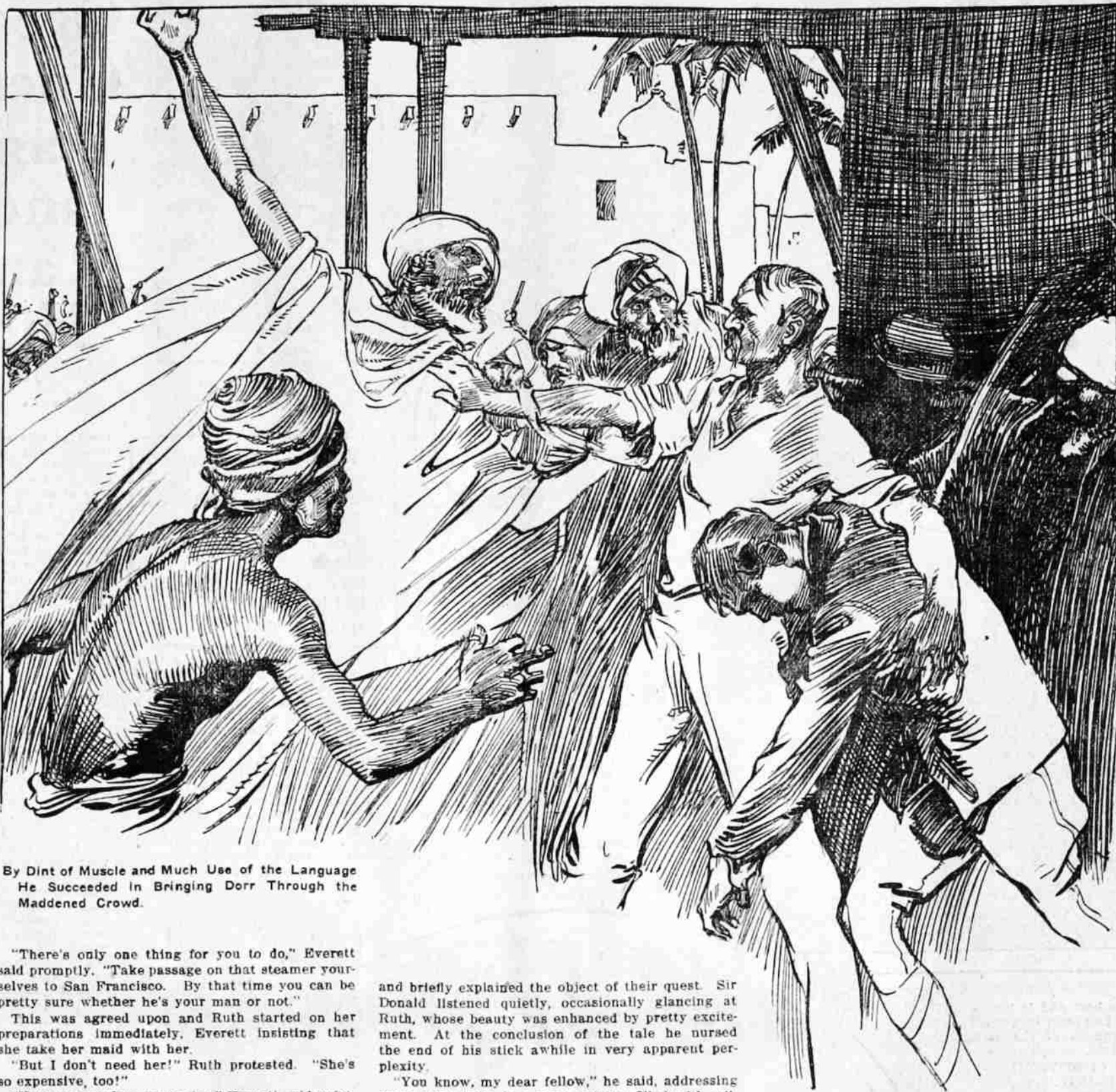
The next morning they had barely finished breakfast when the launch captain was announced. The three of them found him bursting with news.

"I think I located your Hindu," he told them.

"He came down at daylight this morning looking for a steamer sailing for the North. The Halcyon leaves at noon and the steward gave him a job in the galley."

"But it might be another Hindu!" Ruth suggested.

The captain turned toward her and shook his head. "I don't think it possible," he said. "He answered the description, clear down to the rug. Besides that, he seemed kind of nervous and when one of the sailors jolled him the man nearly had a fit. I'm sure he's your man."



By dint of Muscle and Much Use of the Language He Succeeded in Bringing Dorr Through the Maddened Crowd.

"There's only one thing for you to do," Everett said promptly. "Take passage on that steamer yourself to San Francisco. By that time you can be pretty sure whether he's your man or not."

This was agreed upon and Ruth started on her preparations immediately, Everett insisting that she take her maid with her.

"But I don't need her!" Ruth protested. "She's so expensive, too!"

"You are merely a youngster," Everett said quietly, "and you must have a woman traveling with you. It is all right to do as you like out in the mines, where no one would dream of speaking evil or thinking it, but Mrs. Grundy insists on the maid."

John agreed with Everett and departed to get the tickets in spite of Everett's warning that he had better send and get them. The result was that George Drake, just landed from the mine and in search of Wilkerson, found him shadowing Dorr. Drake explained his coming by saying that he had heard nothing from either Wilkerson or Mrs. Darnell, and he could be of no use at the Master Key.

"It's just as well," Wilkerson said sulkily. "I have a dozen things to attend to, and you can help. The first is not to let that man Dorr get out of our sight or turn a hand unless we know it."

In a few sentences filled with bitterness he told the story of the finding of the chest and the futile search for the plans and the abstraction of the idol containing them.

When Wilkerson found that Dorr and Ruth had booked passage on the Halcyon for San Francisco, and had inquired about the next sailing for the Orient, he took Drake aside and they determined that this could only mean one thing! Dorr was on the track of the idol.

"We'll follow them!" he said savagely. "We've spent too much to quit now."

Jean Darnell received Drake coolly and listened to Wilkerson's explanation of his new scheme without a word. Her steady eyes boded no good to someone, and Wilkerson feared she would abandon him. But there was the tenacity of a tigress in her passions, and now she could not give up her sweet revenge nor forego the thought of possessing the wealth that had once been Tom Gallon's, and which he had tried to conceal. She agreed to go and they decided to leave by train that evening, this being in San Francisco in time to meet the steamer and watch for Dorr's next movement.

Two days later Everett again met John and Ruth in the hotel in San Francisco. John's news was that the Hindu they sought had undoubtedly been on the Halcyon and that he had bought a steerage passage for Bombay.

"You ought to get the plans before you get to India," Everett said earnestly. "You'll find yourself in a strange land where it will be like looking for a needle in a haystack to get hold of your man."

Dorr acknowledged this, and outlined his tentative plan of getting hold of the idol during the passage.

"After all, we don't want the idol. I shall try to persuade the man of this, and get him to let me have the papers concealed in it."

At this moment Sir Donald Faversham was announced.

The entrance of the Englishman who had made himself so attentive to Ruth at the Southern hotel awakened little enthusiasm in either Dorr or Everett, but for Ruth's sake they played the civil part. She, on the other hand, received Sir Donald with every evidence of lively pleasure.

"We are this minute talking of going over to India where you lived so long!" she told him, after the first greetings. "And you are just the man to tell us all about it."

"Going to India!" ejaculated the baronet. "My word!"

"Yes," she proceeded, "we are after a Hindu and his idol!"

At this point John laughingly came to the rescue

and briefly explained the object of their quest. Sir Donald listened quietly, occasionally glancing at Ruth, whose beauty was enhanced by pretty excitement. At the conclusion of the tale he nursed the end of his stick awhile in very apparent perplexity.

"You know, my dear fellow," he said, addressing John, "that India is a great country filled with millions of different races. Even granting that this man is a Hindu and that your surmise about the idol is correct, I don't see how you are going to accomplish anything."

"That is just where you can help us!" said Ruth impulsively.

For the instant Sir Donald actually blushed with embarrassment.

Then he gathered himself together and went into details of what they must expect and the difficulties they must encounter.

"If you could only go along!" Ruth said plaintively, when he had got them thoroughly discouraged. "You could talk their horrid language and make them behave."

"By Jove!" said the baronet, smiling, "that's not a half bad idea! I have nothing to do and I might as well see the chaps in India again as stay here."

"You know Sir Donald was in the army there," Ruth explained to Everett.

"Brought up there," Faversham added. "Know India pretty well. I really believe I'd go with you, if you'll accept my company. What a lark!"

Neither John nor Everett received this proposal with undue warmth, but Ruth found it delightful, and before any of them realized the seriousness of the conversation everything had been arranged.

Outside Faversham spoke to Dorr as man to man.

"I don't want to thrust myself on you in any way," he said briefly. "I happen to know India, and to be sure that I can be of service to you. In fact, I should think it a jolly trip. But if you think I take advantage of the little lady's courtesy, say so."

Entirely disarmed, John Dorr had to confess that Sir Donald's offer relieved him of a responsibility too heavy for him. The two parted the best of friends, though John could not refrain from an expression of jealousy to himself. But he knew that Ruth's interests were now doubly safeguarded, and he tried to restrain his unruly heart.

As the steamer sailed the next day they had little time for their preparations, but John made sure that the Hindu was on board before the last line was cast off and the big liner backed into the stream and headed slowly round for the channel to the open sea.

During the long voyage to Hongkong the three were thrown much together, and Sir Donald learned in full the history of the Master Key mine and the present search for the plans of the site of the mother lode. At first he could hardly believe that such things could happen, but slowly he came to understand that the tremendous passions that were fighting to be satisfied would stop at nothing.

"I fear you will find it difficult in India," he told John many times. "The country is immense, it is inhabited by races of different speech and habits and religions, and yet over it all there is the vague spell of the East which is so foreign to your western America that I fear you will not easily recover what you seek."

"But I must get the papers back!" said John quietly. "There is no question about it."

"Many a man has refused to acknowledge that a thing is impossible," Faversham warned him, "and the East has driven him mad. However, I am much interested myself, not only for the sake of Miss Ruth, but from a sporting standpoint, and I promise you I'll do my best to help you."

They considered the suggested plan of taking the idol away from the Hindu during the voyage,

but Faversham vetoed this, after a somewhat extensive investigation.

"You see," he told Ruth, "I know the fellow's language, and he comes from a tribe far in the north of India. Most of those chaps are looked upon as rather sacred, and this man in special, I see, is much respected by the other natives in the steamer. To desecrate his image would simply mean an uproar that we could never explain to the satisfaction of the captain and his officers. In fact, we should all get into the most serious trouble."

"Then your advice is to wait?" she murmured.

"Most decidedly," said the baronet. "And the waiting isn't so bad, is it?"

The steamer was slipping easily along across a moonlit sea that night, and Ruth and Sir Donald were far in the bows, watching the waves foam softly away from the cutwater. The girl had awakened during the last few weeks to the dim happiness of being always the center of men's thoughts. She was not in love, but she was ready to be. The experienced man beside her surmised this. His own heart was beating a new tune. He had lived much, and women had not been aloof from his life. But this fair, proud, inexperienced, yet self-contained girl awakened in him a deeper feeling than he cared to confess.

To be sure, he had John Dorr to contend with. Faversham did not underestimate him as a possible rival, when he allowed himself to go so far as contemplating marriage with Ruth. He liked the young American, and none knew better than he the effect that constant association must have upon a young and very impressionable girl. John's own sentiments were unmistakable; he was deeply in love.

From Hongkong they transhipped to a P. & O. steamer for Bombay and under Sir Donald's expert guidance they shortly found themselves in India and installed in a very good hotel.

"We must wait here till I discover through the natives just where this fellow is bound for."

"Why not simply trace him?" demanded Dorr, impatient to be about his errand.

"That would be out of the question," Faversham explained. "In the first place, you don't understand any native tongue and in the second place the British government doesn't look with favor on strange and unattached Europeans stumbling about among the natives. If you will leave it to me, I think I can not only ascertain the exact place where this fellow comes from, but the temple where the idol belongs."

Several days passed, during which Sir Donald was busy among old acquaintances, leaving John and Ruth to their own devices. They occupied their time in sightseeing. At last Faversham came in to dinner one evening with a smile on his face.

"I've found your man, and learned something of the history of the image," he said.

"And we can get it back?" Ruth inquired promptly.

Sir Donald shook his head gently. "Not so fast, young lady!"

"But that is what we came for!" she went on. "The fact of the matter is," said the baronet, "that image was stolen several years ago, a great many, in truth. It is the tutelary deity of a small city on the river Bhala, and it is about as sacred an article as you could pick up. The people of that city think that since they have lost their image the god is angry with them, and for some years they have quietly conducted a search for it."

"And this man will take it to Bhala?" demanded Ruth.

"He has already started, I understand from some of the natives I know."

"Then what are we to do?" demanded John.

"Bhala is some hundreds of miles up country," Sir Donald continued. "Part of the way we can go by rail, but part of the road we must travel either on foot or by litter—if we go."

"Of course we are going," said Ruth.

"I most earnestly beg you to stop here," said the baronet. "You don't know your India as I do, and even if we accomplish our purpose we should run double risk in getting back."

They argued the matter for some time, but Ruth refused to consider retreat at this stage, and John, impressed though he was by the other's evident sincerity, could not help feeling that as an outsider he did not understand the necessity of the recovery of the plans.

When he and Sir Donald talked it over alone the baronet was even more insistent. He characterized the whole expedition as rash and plainly stated that should the British government get wind of such a search immediate steps would be taken to see that the Americans went no farther.

Dorr was unconvinced, and finally intimated that Faversham had not meant what he said when he volunteered to help them.

Sir Donald shrugged his shoulders and admitted himself helpless in the face of such arguments.

"At least I can go along and do what I can to save the young woman from actual peril," he remarked. "I by no means promise to give you active assistance."

"I'll be satisfied if you'll just tip me off once in awhile," John responded.

They made the journey to Bhala safely, Ruth and John viewing the novel sights that met their eyes on every hand, Sir Donald acting as general guide and instructor. On their arrival at the teeming city they were soon installed in an inn outside the center and some way up the river. Faversham wasted no time in looking up certain people he knew among the natives, and was in a position to inform them that he had not only discovered the temple, but that he had learned that the idol had been recovered and would be restored to its proper shrine with due ceremony and great festivity.

"That will be just our chance," said John. "In the crowds we ought to be safe."

Faversham tried to convince him that this was not so, but Dorr insisted so strongly that the Englishman yielded against his better judgment.

"I'll try to get you within sight of the idol, anyway," he consented. "But I must insist that you obey my instructions implicitly. Otherwise we shall all get into trouble and you will effectually kill any chance you may have of attaining your purpose."

The result of this was that Ruth late that night was awakened by Sir Donald's rapping at her door. When she had flung on some clothes and opened the door she saw from his manner and his disheveled dress that all had not gone well.

"It's true," Faversham told her. "Dorr couldn't resist what he thought was a chance to get hold of the idol. He was captured, but I managed to get away by my knowledge of the language and the help of some natives who are friendly to me."

For the moment Ruth was speechless. Then she inquired for the particulars, and Sir Donald gave them briefly. At the conclusion he remarked, "They won't harm him, but if it gets out that he really intended to steal that image, we shall have trouble."

"But he is a prisoner!" she cried.

"True," said Faversham wearily. "I didn't dare stay. If they had got me, too, you wouldn't have known anything about what had happened for days possibly."

"But you will save him?" she pleaded.

In her appealing beauty Ruth stirred Sir Donald to the depths. He knew that he loved her. For love of her he would do what he knew might mean his own death, but he was helpless in the grip of this sweet passion. Yet he would not go without at least a word of hope and promise.

"I'll get him," he told her. "It will be a hard job, but I'll save him. For your sake, Ruth! and what I come back with him—"

She leaned forward, gloriously content that John was to be brought back to her. She did not read aright the expression in the man's eyes. She threw out her little hands to him joyously.

"I'll always love you if you will!" she whispered.

He stared dully and she withdrew before he could put out his hands or say a word. Five minutes later he was hastily making his way back towards the temple.

To his dying day Sir Donald was never able to explain just how he found John Dorr nor how he extricated him from the howling mob who yelled for the life of the impious man who had laid his hands on their sacred god. His own recollection was of desperately using his tongue, his muscles and his knowledge of the usual intricacies of a native city. John himself could give no clear description, but confessed that he had given up hope of rescue when Sir Donald had appeared as he might.

It was dawn when they reached the hotel, and Ruth was on the balcony watching. When Faversham looked up and called out, "I managed it!" she leaned far over, her eyes shining, and threw him a kiss.

The baronet's heart beat high. He had won her for his wife.

The fact that Dorr and Ruth had sailed for India did not escape Wilkerson's and Mrs. Darnell's sharp senses, and they sailed with Drake as their companion on the next steamer.

"We can easily pick up Dorr's trail when we land," Wilkerson told them.

He found this true. Within two days he had also ascertained that they had left for the interior under the escort of Sir Donald Faversham.

Without delay they followed, and in due time landed in Bhala, not long after Sir Donald had rescued Dorr from the mob who had seized him when he had tried to recapture the idol. Wilkerson grinned when he told Mrs. Darnell of this fiasco.

"But will you fare any better?" she demanded.

"Sure," he said confidently. "I'll let Dorr and this British baronet burn their fingers getting the thing. Then I'll get it away from them. It's a long way back to America, and if we stick tight to Dorr we'll sooner or later be able to handle the plans ourselves."

"Then the Master Key will be ours for good and all."

(To Be Continued.)

Shown at the Oracle Theater every Tuesday and Wednesday.